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California · Robley Wilson

EARLY ONE SUNDAY MORNING when Elaine Prentiss was twelve years old, a UFO touched down in the field behind the local high school. It was an event that perplexed the town—Ransom, Iowa, population 1,377—and Elaine went with her father that same afternoon to see where the landing had taken place.

“I don’t believe any of that stuff,” her best friend, Beatrice Adams, said to her the next day. “You have to be crazy to think something like that could happen.”

Elaine didn’t know how to respond. The field was a forty-acre tract of land that the school board owned and leased to Harvey Andersen so he could grow timothy and brome for his horses, and it was almost ready for the second cutting. The exact place where the spacecraft landed was an uneven black ring, fifty feet across, in the precise center of the field, where the ship’s engines had burned their alien signature into the green of the ripe hay.

And what was to be made of that? She had already seen, in the *Des Moines Register*, aerial photographs of a tornado’s path—an unruly spiral carved by 300-mile-an-hour winds across the furrows of a freshly plowed field—and been impressed by the evidence of powers beyond human control.

Eleven years after, coming home to Iowa too late to say goodbye to her dying father, she drove to the school to see if any record of the space visit had outlasted time. She was distressed to find that the school was gone, “consolidated” with two other rural schools in the county—and that a dozen or so shake-shingled ranch houses occupied much of Andersen’s field. But she was gratified to discover across two of the few vacant lots of the housing development a perfect half-circle of goldenrod that glowed like flame out of the summer-high prairie grasses.

She had moved to southern California in late January, six weeks after her graduation from the university at Ames, and rented a one-bedroom apartment in Upland, in the San Gabriel foothills. She found a job with the state Board of Equalization in Ontario. She bought a Hyundai, red with

white vinyl upholstery. And she wrote her parents, telling them how happy she was to be free at last of Iowa winters.

Yet for a long time she wished she hadn't left the Midwest. She thought at first she would never get used to this odd desert country. The days were unexpectedly warm, the nights unjustly cold. Sometimes she would wake in the middle of the night to strange noises on the roof—a loud thumping and scratching, as of animals fighting—and was told by her new friends at work that it was probably a possum she heard. They also told her they were afraid to let their cats out after dark, for fear coyotes down from the mountains would kill them.

Then, in mid-February, she felt her first earthquake; she was in the bathroom, just stepping out of the shower, when the floor began to tremble under her and she heard a low growl, like the sound of a distant train or a jet plane taking off from the airport nearby. By her own actual count—she could not think what else to do, standing on the mat with the towel held to her mouth and her free hand clinging to the towel bar beside the tub—the quake went on for nearly ten seconds and then subsided into stillness. The radio was on in her bedroom. While she was dressing, a jocular announcer came on to say, “Well, I suppose you folks felt what *we* felt just a few minutes ago,” as if the event were only one more of the shared pleasures of being Californian. Two weeks later, Elaine started bolt upright at three in the morning, roused by the sound of a high wind in the pines and live oaks that surrounded her. It was a Santa Ana; she had never heard such energy in a wind. Next day, trees were fallen in the neighborhood; the streets were a litter of branches and cones and torn shingles.

Her apartment was called “the annex,” and it stood behind a large stucco house owned by a woman from India, Amita. Amita was an immediate aggravation to her: a restless, haunted creature perhaps in her late fifties, up every morning at daybreak to water the lawn of her back yard, moving the hoses every half-hour to a new sector of thirsty grass, prowling the gardens to pluck dead blossoms and fuss at unruly leaves. Day after day, Elaine woke to the rumble of water from Amita's hose splashing against the walls and windows of the annex, and each time for the first few minutes of her waking she could not imagine where she was, what was happening. *Privacy*, she would think; *privacy*. There were no curtains at the windows of her workroom. A shadow would cross her vision; she would look up from reading a book to see Amita in front of the picture window, deep in consul-

tation with the Hispanic gardeners who came every Wednesday to mow and clip and to tend the exotic flowers—camellia and gardenia, bougainvillea and Bird of Paradise were the only ones Elaine had learned to recognize—and she would draw the collar of her bathrobe up to her throat in a reflex against being so vulnerable.

Worst of all, she had to share the telephone. In the beginning, when she knew no one, the nuisance was minor, but as time passed and she had new acquaintances, the inconvenience magnified itself. Before she could respond to the extension in the annex, the ringing would have stopped and a few moments later Amita would rap at her door. “Telly-fon,” the landlady would sing, and halfway through greeting her caller Elaine would hear the phone in the main house clatter into its cradle. She had taken the trouble to buy an answering machine, but it was Amita who screened her calls. If by some chance the machine’s green light was flashing when she came home, the caller frequently turned out to be a friend of Amita’s who had ignored Elaine’s business-like message (“Amita is not home. If you wish to reach Elaine Prentiss, please leave your number after you hear the tone.”), or who had not understood it.

She tried very hard not to be guilty of bad manners herself, returning the phone to its stand instantly if Amita was talking with someone, always being careful when she depressed the cradle switch that the disconnect would be soundless. But one morning, at the height of the desert summer, she lifted the receiver to silence and had actually begun to dial before she realized she had broken in on a pause in a serious conversation.

“It is most burdensome for you,” she heard Amita say. “Yet it is a burden you must be schooling yourself to bear, possibly to be feeling gladness for.”

Elaine held her breath. The telephone was tight in her hands, poised halfway between her ear and the cradle so that, while she was not exactly eavesdropping, she was nevertheless able to hear what was being said.

“I can’t find anything to be glad about,” said a woman’s voice.

“You must think how long is eternity,” Amita said gently. “You must not be being a servant only to this present life.”

Elaine hung up carefully. *Death*, she thought. They were talking about death.

She had thought Amita too frivolous, too preoccupied with trees and lawns and gardens, to concern herself with matters of human life and death,

and for the first time she perceived the woman in a sympathetic light. Until now, she had often spoken scornfully of Amita and her habits—made fun of her to the girls from the office when they went on weekends to Montclair Plaza to window shop or eat frozen yogurt—especially to Becca Livingston, her supervisor.

“Oh, God, yes. India,” Becca would say. “Aren’t you just sick to death of that stupid country? All the Public Television junk that drags on, episode after episode, with handsome brown men always running afoul of constipated Brit women. All those E. M. Forster movies.”

“With handsome Brit women running afoul of constipated brown men,” Elaine would say, to make Becca laugh.

“Any-who,” Becca said. “Deliver me from ladies who wear bedspreads and throw themselves on funeral pyres and stick pasties between their eyes, and from men with bad teeth, who smell of curry and gin. Not for me. No, thank you very much.”

Today, Becca was pouring iced tea from a plastic pitcher. She was being conciliatory, taking her cue from Elaine and, possibly, from a temperature in the low hundreds. “Still, they’re interesting people *spiritually*. Gods and goddesses for this, that and the other. And sex, lots of holy and explicit sex.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Elaine said.

“Not to mention infinity,” Becca said. “The inviting endlessness of the Universe. We Westerners are brought up to go straight ahead through life, cradle to grave and pray for the best. But your basic Hindus—nothing comes to a stop for them. Existence is like one enormous mill wheel, and the river that turns it never runs dry.” She stopped. “I should write that one down,” she said.

Becca liked to read Elaine’s fortune from Tarot cards, and once in a while she cast the I Ching, using three Liberty-head dimes. “I don’t know why it doesn’t work with Roosevelt dimes,” Becca said. “I just can’t get readings that aren’t contradictory.” Sometimes she brought out the Ouija board and prompted Elaine to ask questions of her guide, an androgynous presence named Vatah. “What is Elaine’s word for the year?” Becca asked at the first Ouija séance. The planchette moved through the arched alphabet to answer “B-E-L-I-E-F.” “In what?” asked Elaine. “S-E-L-F,” said Vatah. How to account for that? With her fingers on the pointer, Elaine was certain she

was not *willing* the choices of alphabet, but the pale wood, shaped like a leaf fallen from the tree of her life, moved and spelled and answered. The planchette had a circular cutout, large enough to display one of the Ouija letters, and it was inset with a tiny magnifying glass like an eye focused on Elaine's future. All her fortunes told her that she would face one major setback, but that if she were patient—and if she believed in herself—she would achieve her life's desire.

Becca herself claimed to be psychic, and was full of gossip about the occult and the supernatural. Elaine was never sure if she should trust the things Becca told her; perhaps they were only stories she made up while she was on the freeways, driving from town to town to read the account books of small-businessmen.

Once Elaine asked, "Do you really think everyone has had a past existence?"

"Oh, yes." Becca was positive. "How else to explain people's irrational fears, or the *déjà vu* phenomenon, or that queer sense that the things we're doing are being guided by forces outside our will? My friend Heather? You remember: the skinny brunette we had dinner with in that Chinese restaurant in Riverside? She's terrified of earthquakes."

"Isn't everybody?"

"No, I mean *really, pathologically* afraid of them. It isn't normal, the way she reacts. She has a breakdown; she just curls up in a ball and weeps for days. Any-who, I took her back through her previous incarnations and, sure as you're born, she'd been killed in an earthquake in Peru, three hundred years ago. Enough said."

"*You* took her back?" Elaine was amazed.

"It's no big deal," Becca said. "You just have to let go, let yourself be carried back across the past. It's just one kind of self-hypnotism. Like to try it?"

So one day Elaine positioned herself comfortably on Becca's couch, while Becca put a tape in the machine. She closed her eyes and relaxed, listening to a man's voice explain the procedure. She was to think of nothing, to open herself to the universe, to float upon the currents of time. Becca sat near her in a butterfly chair; Elaine could hear her friend's breathing, like a soft, celestial breeze that played through the interstices of the man's hypnotic words.

Not much happened. There were moments in those spaces between words that might have been glimpses of either past or future, silences filled with echo or premonition. There were moments when the words might have belonged to other places—her childhood Sunday school, the garden outside the annex windows, a music room. Finally, after what seemed a long and mindless time, Elaine heard herself say, “I wonder what Amita would think about this.”

“Oh, Amita,” Becca said.

“I do think I could begin to like her. If only she would sleep later on the weekends.”

She kept her eyes closed. She heard Becca move against the canvas and the frame of the chair creak.

“I have the feeling you’re not taking this seriously,” Becca said. She got up and stopped the tape in mid-sentence.

“I’m sorry,” Elaine said. “I don’t know why I’m so distracted.”

She missed her father. After a year had passed, she wrote to invite him for a visit—invited both parents, in fact, confident that her mother would decline. “There’s a wall between Mother and me,” she told Becca. “A wall even love can never climb over.”

“I’ll bet that goes way back,” Becca said. “Probably to some empress who slaughtered her children. Or an old patriarchal tribe that snuffed its daughters at birth.”

“I think I was just too much responsibility for her. I came along while she still wanted a career.”

“That’s one way of looking at it,” Becca said.

Her father arrived on a March afternoon at the Ontario airport. Standing at the arrival gate, a tamed and warmish Santa Ana wind blowing her hair across her face, Elaine was not surprised to feel impatience when the flight from Cedar Rapids was held out of the gate by an enormous UPS airplane that crawled slowly across the apron; a year was the longest separation from her father she had ever endured. When his plane was at last parked, she watched nervously—what if he’d missed his connection?—and was relieved when he emerged from the doorway and came down the steps, a magazine under his arm, a sporty driving cap perched on his head. But as he walked toward her she was heartsick. His step seemed slower, his face was drawn and lined; even his smile was thinner than she remembered. It

was ten years since his cancer surgery; had the doctors failed him? When he saw her and waved, she could scarcely lift her hand, and then she touched it to her mouth in a gesture of sad recognition.

“Daddy.”

They hugged; she could feel his shoulder blades as if they were stripped bare under his suit jacket. He smelled of talcum and stale malt. When he kissed her cheek, his beard was harsh on her skin.

“I had to change planes in Phoenix,” he said. “I’ve never seen mountains like that. When we were coming down, I thought they were slag heaps, like up near Superior.”

“You look wonderful,” she lied. “I’m glad you could get away.”

“Not much doing in March,” he said. “Can’t get into the fields yet—not that I’m that active. Next year I think I’ll rent all the land out to Paul Tobler.”

“How’s Mom?”

He grinned at her. “Tough,” he said. His gums had drawn away from his teeth, and the teeth were the color of stucco.

Elaine took his arm and steered him into the terminal.

“Your bags are through here,” she said.

“Only got one,” he said. “I travel light.”

She thought he had lost his balance, for he suddenly fell against her. My God, she thought, he *is* sick, he’s having some kind of attack, and she tried to embrace him, to keep him from falling. But then she realized something was happening to her own equilibrium. The cement floor under her feet was rocking; the air of the terminal echoed with shrieks and shouts; people dropped to their knees between the rows of seats. She looked anxiously at her father.

“The hell,” he said.

Before she could say “It’s an earthquake,” one of the windows between the waiting room and the arrival gates shattered and fell. The sound of the breaking was like a chord, but without the tremulous echo that trails real music. Shards of heavy glass sprayed through the room, making lighter notes where they struck.

All she could do was hold on to her father; she put her free hand up to cover her eyes and hugged him against her, thinking the movement under and around them would stop at any moment and they could breathe with relief and make jokes about the event. But it went on, the shuddering and

the excited voices, far longer than the tremor that had once given her pause in the shower at the annex—went on for ten seconds, twenty seconds, more seconds than she was prepared to count.

When it was finally finished, she felt dazed. The voices in the terminal fell to an ordinary hubbub, people picked themselves up from their crouching, a few children were sobbing. She looked at her father. The expression on his face was sardonic.

“I imagine you’re used to this,” he said.

She shook her head. “Never,” she said.

And then she saw that there was a vivid trickle of blood down the back of the hand that held his magazine. She gasped.

“Look at you,” she said. “My God.”

He looked down. “Must have been a piece of that big window,” he said. “I didn’t even feel it.” He took a handkerchief from his back pocket and wrapped it around the cut. “It’s piddly,” he said. He winked at her. “Let’s go tell those baggage handlers to shake a leg.”

By the time they left the terminal, it was dusk. The wind had died, the air was balmy, palpable. Here and there in the expanse of the parking lot were flashing headlights, and the relentless pulse of car alarms shaken into life by the earthquake. Elaine carried her father’s bag—a blue Samsonite case that belonged to Mother—and led the way down a long aisle of cars.

“Doesn’t feel like March,” her father said. “Balmy. I see why you like California, earthquakes and all.”

“That’s only the third or fourth I’ve felt in all the time I’ve been out here. And it was the worst.”

“Mother Nature wanted to initiate me,” he said. “Show this Iowa farmer you can’t take the land for granted.” He took off his cap and wiped at his forehead with the back of his hand. “I could use a nap,” he said.

Elaine thought how thin his hair was; how bald he had gotten since she had last seen him.

Her father’s hand healed in a few days, and the aftershocks from the tremor that wounded him gradually subsided in strength and frequency. For the first week the shocks were surprisingly violent, shaking her apartment with a noise and a shudder like a truck hitting the side of the building. Books fell; dishes rattled. If it happened while she was home from work, her

father raised an eyebrow in her direction. Did he think she had some private foreknowledge, some wisdom she kept from him?

"Those things aren't unusual," Becca said. "Mystics know. Animals have premonitions. Did you know that the day your father flew in, hours before the five-point-five, coyotes gathered in a clearing on the side of Mt. Baldy and howled together?"

"I wish they'd howled loud enough so I could have heard them."

"But don't you just love quakes?" Becca said. "That energy, that elemental force?"

This was a conversation they'd had at work; Elaine had walked away. How could one possibly respond to that sort of enthusiasm?

"I was with friends," Amita said when Elaine introduced her father on that Sunday afternoon. "We were making gossip, drinking tea, and then we saw a mountain fall down."

"Rockslide," her father said. Amita nodded and bowed.

As for Father, he took a solemn interest in the neighborhood fault patterns—a subject to which Elaine had never paid much attention. They were between the San Andreas and San Jacinto faults, she told him. That was as much as she knew. "The side of the San Andreas that will someday be desirable beachfront," Becca liked to say.

After scrupulous attention to the television, her father announced to Elaine that in fact they were perched on top of a smaller east-west fault known as the Cucamonga, and it was this one that lay at the center of what he took to calling "his" earthquake.

"Years from now," he said, "you'll remember my earthquake and think of it as the time the airport fell on Father."

His plan was to stay the month—long enough that she was afraid entertaining him might become a problem. She had made a tourist list: Universal Studios, the L. A. County and Norton Simon museums, the gardens at the Huntington, the *Queen Mary*. None of those places engaged him, and so they did not go to them. He wanted to see where she worked, made flattering remarks to her colleagues, rode with her on one of her auditing daytrips. He spent hours sitting under the blue-and-white umbrella in Amita's back yard, "watching flowers grow"—though in fact he mostly dozed in the shade. One Sunday Elaine coaxed him to Santa Anita and watched him lose seventeen dollars on the horses.

"Big spender," he said to her. "But I can't take it with me."

It surprised her that her father was so easy a guest. She was relieved not to squander her vacation time, and yet—the feeling nagged at her—she was frightened by her father's lethargy.

"Nothing special," he said when she asked if anything was wrong. "Your old dad's maybe getting past the gallivanting stage."

When she could, she left work in mid-afternoon, and they sat together in Amita's green and flowered yard with iced tea and sugar cookies—listening to the mockingbird that regularly held forth from the live oak, breathing the heady scent of rambler roses that had begun to open into the unseasonable warmth. From time to time Amita joined them, and then they drank spiced tea from translucent cups and talked about the world and its differences from one culture to the next.

"In India are farmers too," Amita said. "What now I am hearing people call 'aquaculture,' it is the ancient way of my father and grandfather. Rice. Beans. All lifting to the sunlight from mud and wet."

"There's another word," Elaine's father said. He put up one hand, as if to keep the women from interrupting. "I've read about it. It's getting to be fashionable." His eyes darted from one face to the other, as if the word might be read there. "Hydroponics," he said. "That's what they call it now, but it's the same thing."

"Full circle," Elaine said.

"Like the serpent which swallows its tail." Amita looked at Elaine's father and reached for his teacup. "Do you wish me to read your fortune?"

Elaine's father grinned. "I've heard that's what everybody does in California."

"Only some bodies," Amita said solemnly. "But you must hold the cup so—" Left-handed, she held her own teacup by its handle and lifted it from the saucer. "—and be moving it in a circle, three times, leftward. Yes?" She looked at Elaine. "Leftward?"

"Counterclockwise," Elaine said.

"Just so."

Elaine's father imitated their hostess; he winked at Elaine.

"Now to put the cup down, this way, so, in its own dish." Amita inverted her cup over the saucer and set it there. The man did the same; some of the dregs of pale tea seeped out from under the edge of the cup. Amita

reached across the table and rotated his cup three times more—Elaine counted—and tilted it up to look inside.

“What’s the verdict?” Elaine’s father said.

Amita tipped the thin cup to show him a cluster of tea leaf shreds at the bottom rim, under the handle.

“Once more a circle, but this one only slightly open, not yet being closed.”

“Which means?”

“Perhaps some thing soon to be finished,” Amita said.

“Of course,” Elaine said. “Daddy’s visit. His plane leaves in a week.”

“Maybe it means the end of the world,” he said. “Another one of your quakes.”

“Also success,” said Amita. “The circle as it is closing is the sign of achievement. Yes? ‘Achievement’?”

“Ah,” Elaine’s father said.

But Elaine felt suddenly annoyed. She wished Becca were here; Becca would have done the same ritual, but she would have explained it as she went and Elaine would have put more trust in the outcome. “What about the stars?” she said. “You should ask my father his sign.”

“Libra,” her father said.

“Astrological science,” Amita said. “Are you believing in such?”

“Could be,” he said. “I don’t want to shut my mind.” He looked over at Elaine and winked again. “I guess that if stars control planets, and planets influence moons, and the moon affects tides here on Earth, then it would be foolish of me not to concede that they might push around my hundred-and-fifty pounds pretty easy.”

“I am not so familiar with Zodiac things,” Amita said.

“It’s O.K.,” Elaine’s father said. “I’ve had enough hocus-pocus for one day.”

“You should talk to Becca,” Elaine said, but what she was now thinking of was how little he weighed—his casual acknowledgement of how slight he had become—and how different he was from the strapping man whose presence had guarded her childhood.

“I am seeing eternity in the eyes of your father,” Amita told her early one evening of the last week of his visit. The three of them had taken tea, and the man was napping in the white chair set under the Bird of Paradise blossoms. “It is making me humble.”

She whispered, so she would not wake him, but the words sent a chill through Elaine, a coldness sharper than the mere onset of dark.

On the night before her father's departure she lay awake and wondered how ill he might really be: his cheeks so hollowed, his skin almost gray. The next morning in the terminal, her father walked warily and quickly under the new glass. At the departure gate, he motioned for her to sit beside him on the heavy bench and told her what she had known and been afraid to confront. The wind was hot on her face and took her breath—it was as if each word her father uttered brought her nearer the suffocation of dread.

"They never got all of it," he said. "They never do. It's the same cancer they wrestled with ten years ago. My young doctor thinks it started farther back than that, way back in the Fifties or Sixties, from the chemicals we used on the crops. Herbicides or pesticides—who knows which? It might be like that Agent Orange stuff we sprayed on our own troops in the jungles. You know how careless we were in the old days, how we didn't know any better. Nobody ever warned the farmers, and if they had, we're a stubborn bunch. What farmer would have listened?"

He embraced her and kissed her.

"That's why I came out to California," he said. "To see you all grown up and living your own life. To tell you we probably shouldn't plan to get together again. Leastwise not on this side of the border."

Elaine sat without words, his thin hands enclosing both of hers, his life—pulse and warmth and the small tremblings of his love for her—touching hers for probably the last time.

He grinned at her. "I don't mean Mexico," he said.

How could she laugh with him? She wanted to beg him to stay, not go back to her mother who, she knew, would never be patient with him, or gentle, or generously attentive. She wanted to keep him here, thousands of miles from the land and the life that had murdered him.

Instead, she leaned her head against his shoulder and gazed silently through the bars of the waiting area: at the sun shimmering off the white tarmac, at the baggage handlers laughing together under the silver belly of the jetliner that would take her father from her.

"Why is she the way she is?" she said.

"Your mother?" She felt a movement of his shoulder that was either shrug or sigh. "I think she just expected a better shake from life."

"Then why didn't she leave you?"

He laughed. "'What fools these mortals be,'" he said. He sat straighter, obliging Elaine to lift her head. "I took good care of her," he said. "She was never cold, never hungry."

"And you took care of me," Elaine said.

"I tried. God knows I tried."

"Do you remember the day you killed the rooster?"

His brow furrowed.

"I was six or seven. That was back when Mom was trying to raise chickens, and you and I were walking across the yard when this huge red rooster came after me. He was pecking at me, at my ankles. I was terrified. I was barelegged, and every time the rooster pecked me I'd see a new spot of blood appear."

"And I wrung its neck," he said. "Did I?"

"Yes. You do remember. You reached down and grabbed its neck and just swung it in the air once. It took a half-second." And the sound it made she could still hear; the awful breaking of the rooster's neck—something tearing: thick paper, or a cloth becoming rags. "Then you just tossed it onto the ground."

"It didn't please your mother."

"Oh, Daddy," she said. She flung her arms around his shoulders and hugged. "I thought you were perfect."

The gate was open, the other passengers making a queue, and her father stood up to join them.

"It's funny," he said, "that you remember me killing something."

He kissed her on the forehead and gave up his ticket to the attendant. Then, when he was halfway across the tarmac, he stopped and came back to where Elaine stood trying not to weep. He put up one hand as if in farewell, but he didn't touch her.

"Thanks for the earthquake," he said.

A few weeks after, she had dinner with Becca and told about her father's fortune as revealed in his teacup.

"What's Amita doing with tea leaves?" Becca wanted to know. "That's not a Hindu thing."

"I don't know. She just offered to tell his fortune."

"Well, it's obvious," Becca said. "The circle is completion, a death image, the end of a life."

"But Amita said the circle could also mean success."

Becca gave her a pitying smile. "Don't you know? If the reader *offers* the reading, the prophecy is actually always bad."

"Oh, God," Elaine said.

When she came home from that very dinner, she found recorded on her answering machine the news she dreaded most—her mother's terse "Your father's gone; the funeral's day after tomorrow." It was too late to place a call to Iowa, so she undressed herself in a kind of solemn trance and went to bed. Amita had forgotten to turn out the yard lights; the room glowed with pinkish light and unusual shadows, as if that day's sun would not quite set. She slept brokenly, and late the next morning she woke with sharp cramps in her legs. The pain was in the calves, at the back of the legs, and she gritted her teeth as she kneaded the muscles and tried to relax herself. Salt, was it, that made cramps happen? Lack of salt? She thought she had read that somewhere, and resolved to take better care with her diet.

To make her discomfort worse, she heard voices—many voices—outside her bedroom window. The voices were close and clear, the rhythm of them like the rhythm of Amita's speech, so that Elaine was not surprised after she hurriedly put on her robe and looked outside to find the back yard populated by black-haired women in saris, and brown-skinned men in white shirts and ties and dark business suits. There were perhaps a dozen people, some carrying tall tumblers of iced tea, some with shorter glasses she took to contain whiskey or colored gin. They stood in knots of three and four in front of a large canvas propped against the back fence—the canvas an enormous painted landscape that displayed snow-capped mountains rising from a green, tropical valley into a turquoise sky.

I have solitude without privacy, she reminded herself. She wanted to slide the aluminum window frame open, to shout at Amita and her guests, *My father is dead*. But then she remembered the compassionate tone of Amita's voice as she consoled the unknown woman at the other end of the overheard phone connection, and her anger softened. The impulse to complain left her; she limped into the bathroom to shower and begin her first full day of grief.

After she dressed and made coffee, the cramps were gone, but now the pain had consolidated itself in her right foot, in the heel, so that she fa-

vored it by limping on the ball of that foot. She called a travel agency to arrange her flight home, and by the time she had packed, and phoned Becca to tell her she would be away from work for a few days, the pain in her right foot was so severe that she almost fell when she stepped outside to empty the trash. All she wanted was to drag herself back into the apartment, pour a small glass of wine, and prop herself up in bed with a book until it was time to leave for the airport. But as she was carrying the wastebasket into the annex, Amita appeared at the back door of the main house.

"I am having a nice cup of tea," Amita announced. "Please to join with me? Perhaps from your father's visit we are at last truly acquaintances?"

Her sentences curved upward like questions pleading to be answered. There was that about Amita's speech—the inimitable lilt of it that turned English into unresolved melodies.

"I'd like to," Elaine said, "except that I'm having a lot of trouble getting around." She turned so that Amita could see her face and—she hoped—the agony written upon it. "My foot," she said. "It's very painful. I don't know if I've sprained it or what."

"You are not feeling well?" Amita descended the two steps from the back door and took Elaine's arm. She was dressed as she had been earlier, in a vivid blue sari and pale leather sandals; a spot of cosmetic red was vivid on her brow. "I will help you walking," she said. "Come."

"Really, no," Elaine said, but her protest was futile. Amita was supporting her up the steps and into the main house.

"What is?" Amita said. "Did you fall?"

"I don't know. It's like a shooting pain in my right foot; it starts in the arch and stabs into the heel."

"Shooting?" Amita said. "That is serious business, shooting."

"It *feels* serious," Elaine said. She let herself be led to an upholstered chair and sank into it. The chair faced an ornate coffee table upon which Amita's tea service was set out: the delicately flowered teapot, sugar and creamer, the shallow bowl with lemon wedges, two paper-thin cups and saucers—all arranged on an oval silver tray. The table was low, of dark wood, exotically carved into a relief of elephants and palm leaf backgrounds, and it looked as if it might also be a cabinet of some kind.

"You had company earlier," Elaine said. "Very distinguished-looking ladies and gentlemen."

"Oh, yes. It is Doctor Chatterjee, my painter friend. He is arrived home from a visit to India and Nepal. He is showing off to us in my flower garden his new work. Stately mountains. He and his wife, and I with my late husband, we have been closest friends from India and from California. Kamal and Bharati Chatterjee."

"I didn't know about your husband—that you were married."

"Oh, he is long dead." Amita laid her right hand over her breast. "The heart," she said. "He had no pain. As for myself, I have the tending of the trees, the grasses, the flowers."

"Death is very much on my mind," Elaine said, "because my father has just died. My mother telephoned." She tried—her foot was throbbing—to make herself more comfortable in the chair.

"I am sorry to hear. I had thought it, meeting him, looking into the deep well of his eyes. But the death is no matter," Amita said. It was as if the older woman were scolding her. "Because of death, the soul is hastened on its path through the Creation. It achieves—" She stopped. "I cannot say the word for it."

"Rebecca would agree that the soul lives on. A friend of mine."

"Yes, she is correct. You will grieve for your father's body; that is proper—but also you will rejoice for the soul which leaves him."

"I wish I understood that."

"A dear American friend of my own, she recently has lost her daughter in a motorcar accident. I am trying very hard to wish her to be at peace. She cannot be convinced."

"Americans are skeptics," Elaine said. "An American wants to know exactly where the soul is going, and which airline it's taking."

"I am no wise person," Amita said, "being like you merely a woman. But if you ask me: What is the farthest destination of the soul's journey? My reply is: Its farthest destination is to the city of enlightenment, the place where the labor of each soul is accomplished and is of highest imaginable good." She poured steaming tea into Elaine's cup. "Please," she said, "share with me this lovely tea."

Elaine took the cup and saucer and brought them to her lap. The light from the front window glowed in the teacup; the liquid was the color of sunsets she had seen regularly since she moved west.

"It is from my native Calcutta, this tea. Sometimes it is called 'Mogul's Dream'."

"But how does the soul know when its work—its labor—is accomplished?" Elaine pursued. "How does the person—the person in whom the soul lives—how does she know?"

"She will know," Amita said. She sipped from her cup, her eyes fixed on Elaine. The red spot on Amita's forehead seemed to Elaine to be a center, an artifice like the bright object a hypnotist might use to keep the attention of the person being mesmerized. "You will know," Amita repeated.

"How?"

"You see: the soul has lived many lives. Many, many lives. In each life the soul is carrying out some part of its entire mission. In each life it is accomplishing some part of its long journey to find the sublime." She clapped her hands together once. "That is the word I could not recall before. 'Sublime'."

Elaine sat utterly without movement, her eyes fixed on the color between Amita's eyes. I am in California, she reminded herself. I am sitting in an ordinary house in California—one of the states of the United States, just as Iowa is.

"To achieve the sublime, it is a serious endeavor," Amita said. "It cannot be attained in one lifetime only, nor even in two or three, for the sublime is a very far distant place. This is why the soul—which is making what you Americans may call a 'deal' with God, saying to God, 'I will make the sublime my destiny'—this is why the soul must cross the bridges of several lives in order to carry out the arrangement agreed upon. You understand 'deal'? It was my husband's word. In some religions, the people say the soul has twelve lives before the deal is finished, but it is not my particular belief."

"Is it a happier place—this next life?"

Amita smiled. "This is depending," she said.

"On what?"

"On many things. For my poor husband, I am sure the bridge has led him to a better universe—a better deal. He is now god-like, as he always wished. He was a man of strong opinion, a positive man. 'Do you wish to argue?' he would say, 'or do you wish the truth?' He is perhaps a rock, or a tree of teak. He is something which cannot be bent, I am sure."

"Do we all have many lives?"

Amita smiled. "Child, you have had many more lives than one," she said. "And your father especially more. Do please be drinking your tea."

"Yes," Elaine said. She tasted the liquid in the cup. It was warm and smelled of perfume; it left a bitter aftertaste. She realized she must have grimaced, for Amita appeared surprised.

"You don't like?" she said.

"I'm sorry. It's different from what we all drank outside. Not a taste I expected."

Amita opened the carved wooden door of the table and reached inside. She brought out a green bottle, uncapped it, and poured a small amount of clear liquid into Elaine's tea.

"Simply gin," Amita said. "It will make the Mogul's Dream perhaps more palatable for you. Also it will be relaxing the body." She poured a bit into her own teacup, then put the bottle away.

Elaine tasted her drink; the odor of the gin mingled with the other, and it did seem to cancel out the novel bitterness of the tea.

"My friend Rebecca," Elaine said, "she often talks of the travels of the soul. She claims she can lead me through my former lives."

"Yes, if you wish to go, then you must go," Amita said. "Have you tried already?"

"I lay on her couch and listened to a tape-recording."

"And the voice of the record was carrying you back?"

"I'm not sure," Elaine said.

She tried to recapture the afternoon at Becca's house, before her father's visit and her mother's message blotted it out. There was a sunporch behind Becca, a brilliant cube of light, like an aquarium she swam in—the butterfly chair a giant sea creature, a ray; the room swimming too, the furniture mimicking a topography of the floor of the ocean, and Becca's sleek gray cat moving across the figured carpet as silently as a marine shadow. The voice from the tape machine was measured and deep, almost a whisper, urging her—not *backward* in time so much as *downward*—and she had experienced an odd sense of dissolving in this room of Becca's, putting herself back together in another room, another time. Too much television foolishness, her mother would have said, and yet now she remembered that for a few moments she had indeed been moving among unfamiliar people in a familiar place. There were gaslights; she could smell the heat of the flames. The walls were paneled. She was dressed in unaccustomed clothing that rustled. She could not quite manage to see anyone's face. "I don't think I tried hard enough."

"It is not so very easy," Amita said. "It is like what you would in other places call—I do not know the word; it is what prevents a still object from moving."

"Inertia."

Amita clapped her hands happily. "Justly so. *Inertia*. Inert, yes? You know its meaning? The soul is resident in the body, it needs not to be moving except at the birth and death, at the beginning and end, of a human life. And the body, you see, the body makes claim upon the soul; the body is not wishing the soul to travel, for the soul is what gives body the spark of living; the body is being fearful the soul will not return, lest the body die."

"Like my father's," Elaine said. She drank the last of the spiked tea and set the delicate cup in its saucer. "I have to fly home."

"And so you should do, should you not?"

"Except that I'm practically an invalid," Elaine said. "I can hardly walk with the pain in my foot and ankle."

"Ah," Amita said. "Ah, yes."

"Rebecca would tell me it's psychosomatic—that it's all in my head, my fancy—but I say what difference does it make? I still can't get around."

Amita poured both tea and gin into their cups, sliding Elaine's toward her, sipping from her own, her bright black eyes fixed on Elaine, the mark on her brow taking the afternoon light and transforming it into a vermilion as pure as the color of blood. Elaine drank. A truck rumbled past the windows and the liquid in the cups trembled.

"Your father, he was very young," Amita said.

"Not even sixty. But he was a farmer; he handled those chemicals—weed-killers, insecticides—all his life." She shrugged, thinking she could not exactly explain to Amita the significance of such chemistry. "It's cancer," she said. "He told me when he was here."

"In his soul's next life," Amita said gently, "there will be no poisons. The poisons are done for him."

"I hope in *my* soul's next life there will be no pains in the legs," Elaine said.

But Amita did not smile. "What is true of body is always true of body," she said. "I do not mean to be saying a mystery; I mean that whenever the soul journeys, the body is being fearful. Your pain is a manifesting of that fear. The feet, they are the future. They are the means of taking you into

the tomorrow, and so that is where body has chosen to put the pain. But you must be respectful to your father, despite discomfort.”

“I can’t bring him back,” Elaine said.

“The spirit does not look back,” Amita said, “of course. But so much is clear: You are obliged to go to him. It is in the pact the soul has made. If it should be otherwise, then body would not try to deceive you with the pain in your foot.” She smiled and lifted her cup. “Go. As soon as your airplane is in the sky, body will surrender and your foot will not be hurting you.”

And it was true. By two o’clock the following morning, when she arrived at her parents’ house and let herself in the front door with the key she always carried—and even though she was met by her mother standing on the hall stairs, telling her that her father had died at midnight and, never mind, he would not have recognized her—her foot felt fine.

She stayed three days. On the third day, after the funeral service, she drove her mother home from the cemetery. The two women were silent the whole way. Outside the car the undulating fields showed corn-green to the horizons; the only trees were lines and groves of windbreak pine or poplar along the west and north boundaries of empty farmyards. The air had a clarity and a luminescence that magnified distance, and because there were neither forests nor mountains, nothing concealed the passages of the weather over this place.

Inside the house where she had been a child, she sat for a while in the dim parlor with its lace curtains and gold-framed paintings and the baby grand piano that had not been tuned in years. Mourners—mostly family friends from towns nearby—stood or posed stiffly on the edges of needle-point chair seats; they sipped tea and coffee from cups that had belonged to her father’s maternal great-grandmother. There were small white cakes on white paper doilies, brought by one of the neighbors. The conversations were subdued and the atmosphere, Elaine thought, *strained*.

“We never use this room,” she murmured to her mother. “It smells musty.”

“I didn’t have time to straighten up the living room,” her mother said crossly. “And I didn’t have the *will*. I had to make do.”

Elaine looked away and bent her head over the teacup in her lap. It was an ordinary tea from ordinary tea bags—nothing like Amita’s. And this was

an occasion when Elaine would certainly have welcomed the gin. Now she overheard her mother describing her father's last days: the morphine, the hallucinations, the awful end. When had his soul slipped away to resume its travels? she wondered. At one secret, flickering instant, in the agony between the sleep of the drug and the sleep of the body's death?

"Do you like California, dear?"

Startled, Elaine turned toward a small woman in a black cloche and black dress. "I'm sorry," she said. "My mind was wandering."

"Isn't that where you're living now? California?"

"Yes. Yes, I like it a lot."

"I'm Margaret Adams," the woman said. "You went to school with my Beatrice."

"Oh, yes." *You have to be crazy to believe something like that.* Elaine smiled and pressed the woman's hand. "Forgive me. I think Mother expects me to help her."

She went to the kitchen. Her mother was taking a tray of tiny, crustless sandwiches out of the refrigerator.

"Remember when Daddy took me to the place where the spaceship landed? Out behind the school?"

"Your father was an extremely gullible man," her mother said. She peeled aside the sheet of waxed paper that covered the sandwiches. "Look at these," she said. "The church auxiliary sent them; what do you bet they're leftovers from last Wednesday's hen-party?" She picked up the tray and carried it to the parlor.

Elaine followed. Mostly it was women who had stayed to nibble the trimmed sandwiches and talk in hushed voices about the service. She tried to imagine the presence of Amita in sari and sandals, the red mark bright on her forehead, her sweet smile radiant among the mourners.

"I thought maybe I'd drive out there," Elaine said.

"Suit yourself," her mother said.

Elaine set her tea aside and left the room, acknowledging as she went the few mourners she knew, the eyes and mouths that expressed condolence. Not a single face said: *joy*. No one said: *fare well*.

The road that led to Andersen's field was familiar and still unpaved, but she scarcely recognized the neighborhood of the old school. The school itself had been torn down. Houses were everywhere, ranch houses with small

yards and tiny attached garages. The development had a single cement access road, off the end of which, star-like, the houses clustered along three short side streets ending in cul-de-sacs. It encroached on most of the old hayfield.

For a few minutes Elaine was lost, but once she had left the rented car and walked behind the houses to discover the wonderful arc of goldenrod, what had originally happened there flowed back into her mind with all the pure force of a vision. She saw her child self in the center of the curious landing site, standing beside her father, holding hard to his upper arm as if she feared she would be blown away by the winds of another world, another atmosphere.

"Look at this," her father had said. "Imagine the size of it." Then he had drawn her hand down his arm until his own fingers gripped hers, and led her to the blackened perimeter of the circle. "You take the inside track," he told her, "and I'll take the outside."

Still holding hands, the two of them had walked the ring, counterclockwise, her father outside the circle, herself inside, the path of bent and blackened grass making a distance of a yard or so between them. Periodically, there would be a place within the ring where the grass was burned shorter and the earth itself had changed color, and here her father would stop for a moment, their joined hands so far extended above that place that she could feel the stretch of the muscles under her arm.

"Hot spot," her father had said. "This was where the exhaust shot down from the engines. Imagine the heat."

They found seven such spots; at each her father made her pause, and at each he marveled. Driving home in the pickup, he had lectured her. "Old Shakespeare had it right: 'More things in heaven and earth' than we dream of. Maybe yours'll be the generation that sees these things for real—not just the scars they leave behind."

"Maybe," she had said. What *had* she believed at the time, and what *ought* she have told Beatrice Adams? Whatever she should have said then, today she would have to say, "How dare I not believe?" Anything less would betray her father, herself, all the traffic of the world's souls on the crowded paths meandering toward eternity.

"Sometimes they take people away with them," her father had said. "Take them right into space to find out what makes humans tick. And sometimes the people never come back."

"Do you believe that's true?"

"I don't know, honey. Those are just the stories."

"Maybe the people are liars," she said. "Or crazy." She had kept quiet after that, pondering the matter. Why would people make up such a thing? And what about those who supposedly never returned?

"Maybe they're just lonely," her father said.

On this adult visit she knelt in the curved field of goldenrod and began gathering the bright flowers, pulling the stalks out of the ground. The earth smelled like mildew; she wondered if its smell was unique because of the intense heat it had once absorbed. She brought the roots of one of the plants up to her face. Something intense, acid, filled her nostrils, like ammonia or lye or strong vinegar—or all of those, mingled and indistinguishable. Nothing at all like the death-smell of earth at her father's graveside.

The day her father first learned of his cancer—it was hardly a year after they had walked their fascinated circle—she had come alone to this place. She had sat in the center of the ring and wept for Daddy, though she was scarcely thinking of death at thirteen years old, had not yet even begun to confront the possibility that the cancer would kill him. She had only sat and wept, a part of her mind wishing the UFO would return to fetch her, take her wherever the people who never came back had been taken; another part weighing her love and concern for her father, trying to make sense of the news he had brought home to his family. Finally she had gone even further, to the deepest part of her mind, to grapple with the question of what happens when someone dies—where do they go, and is it the same place where they came from?—and she heard herself complaining out loud, "Wherever I was before I was born, why didn't you leave me there?"

All at once her father's arms were around her, and he was lifting her up, saying, "Because we wanted you. Because we love you."

She remembered that at first she had thought the voice, and the arms lifting her off the ground, were God's—a confusion Amita might understand—and when she realized that her father had followed her here, she had begun crying all over again.

She took a different road back to the cemetery, crossing the wooden viaduct over the abandoned Illinois Central tracks, the long stalks of goldenrod heavy with harsh perfume on the seat beside her. Elaine marveled that at the funeral she had not been able to cry for her father's sake. She felt not much of anything—certainly not loss, not regret, not fear—and for

a few minutes she sat in the car at the Prentiss plot and surveyed the empty scene. The mounded earth that hid her father's physical remains was smothered in the flowers from the church. What was important about her father was no longer accessible to her; certainly it was not buried under this decorated earth.

She got out of the car and carried the armful of goldenrod to the grave. She arranged the stalks in a circle, on top of the nursery flowers, knowing how foolish her action would look to anyone watching—these weeds, piled on these cultivated blossoms—but saying to herself that everyone chose a different measure for grief. Her mother's was bitterness; hers was only a version of her father's willingness to believe in things he could not see. "Safe journey," she whispered over the swollen earth. "Remember this place."

In the car, she looked back only once. Perhaps she might have done or said something more appropriate—surely the soul in its travels could not in any conventional sense "remember"—though even in the dusk the wreath of goldenrod blazed behind her like a landmark. She drove away from it as fast as she dared on gravel—home first for her bags, and then on to the airport, California, the unsettled edge of this world.